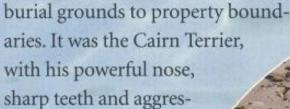


## Ranger Ridley

Cairns, or stone piles, have for centuries abounded in the

Scottish Highlands, marking everything from



sive personality, who helped Highlanders

keep rats and other

vermin from

infesting both the

cairns and their

stone cottages.

Indispensable then in Scotland,

another Cairn has

become indispen-

sable today on the

beaches of North Padre

Island, Texas, where he is

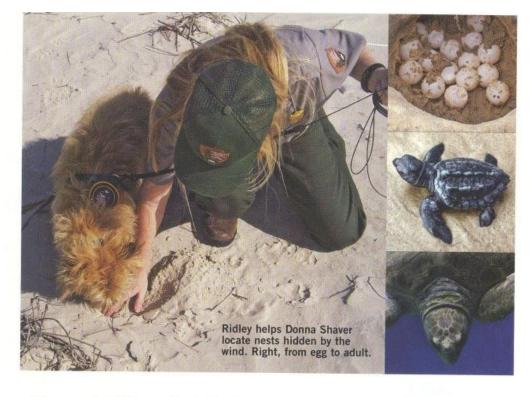
helping save the rare Kemp's

ridley sea turtle from extinction. >









His name is Ridley and he is the family pet of Donna Shaver, PhD, director of the Sea Turtle Science and Recovery program at Padre Island National Seashore, who has been working tirelessly to establish a secondary nesting beach for these turtles since she first volunteered there as a Cornell University student 28 years ago. (She's even refused several promotions in order to remain with the turtle program.)

Little more than two decades ago, the Kemp's ridley—the most vulnerable of the seven species of sea turtle-was declared "genetically extinct" by many conservationists; the turtle's numbers had dwindled to about 250 to 300 breeding females in the world, virtually all of whom nested only on Rancho Nuevo, a single 30-mile stretch of Mexican beach roughly 200 miles south of Brownsville, Texas. From 1978 to 1988, in an effort to create a secondary birthing area, a few thousand eggs were flown annually to Padre Island to hatch and grow for a year in captivity before release. It was called "head-starting," after President Lyndon Johnson's preschool program for disadvantaged children.

"This program is so important—if a catastrophe were to strike the main nesting beach in Mexico," Shaver says, "there

still might not be enough nesting here in Texas to preserve the species." Shaver's concern is fact-based. In the summer of 1979, an underwater oil well blew out about 500 miles from the Mexican nesting beach and the drifting slick threatened 10,000 baby turtles with a gooey death; many were saved, however, thanks to the efforts made by rescuers in a fleet of Mexican helicopters, which flew them to safety.

This sort of threat is why every single Texas nest is valuable. "We have had a huge increase in nesting along the 67 miles of Padre Island National Seashore during the last five years, from five in 2000 to 93 last year," explains Shaver. The curve is indeed upward; the number of nests is increasing along the entire Texas coastline, from one or two nests every one to three years in 1980 to 195 in 2008. But for the turtle's future to be secured, the number needs to grow by about 10 times—or to approximately 1,950—within the next 10 to 20 years.

The Kemp's ridley is one of the fastestnesting of all sea turtles, taking only 30 minutes to an hour to crawl out of the surf, dig her nest, lay her 100 or so eggs (known as a clutch), cover the nest and return to the Gulf. During nesting season, the beach is patrolled hourly by volunteers and National Park Service rangers who look for the distinctive tracks in the sand or actively nesting turtles. Found eggs are relocated to the humidity- and temperature-controlled incubation building at NPS headquarters. Despite this, some nests are still missed. At about 80 pounds on average, the Kemp's ridley is the smallest and lightest of all the sea turtle species, and the tracks she makes on her way from the water to the nesting site are quickly blown away by the wind. Shaver knew there were more eggs to be found, and it was driving her crazy.

Two years ago, Shaver began to exploit Ridley's acute sense of smell to locate these elusive eggs. "I've known for years that dogs and coyotes are two of the prime predators of wild turtle nests in many nations, especially in Central America. And dogs are also used to find illegal drugs or explosives at airports and locate trapped people after earthquakes. So I was anxious to see if Ridley could find the 'missing' nests," says Shaver.

When Ridley was just a puppy, Shaver and her fiancé—Stephen Kurtz, a National Park Service turtle patrol volunteer—had trained him to locate objects by hiding liver and chicken treats around the house and telling him to "go find." Then, when he was about a year old, they began taking him to the beach for his next big step: identifying the smell of turtle eggs.

At a freshly emptied turtle nest, Ridley's attention was directed toward its pungent scents of hatchling turtles; leftover egg fluid; and remnants of the mother turtle's lubricating mucus, which coats the eggs as they're laid. Ridley soaked it up into his Cairn "hard drive," and after he got a nose full, Shaver and Kurtz filled the empty nest with sand, walked him down the beach for about a half-hour, and then told him to "go find the nest." Time after time, Ridley raced back to the exact site. Within about 10 weeks, he was ready to begin the real work of finding the few but critical "invisible nests" the Gulf wind had hidden.

Now, he is brought to the beach several times each year to find nests at track sites where humans have been unsuccessful,



his Scottish Highland nose sniffing for the faintest scent of turtle eggs, with Shaver or Kurtz in hot pursuit. When he finds a nest, Ridley digs slightly, careful not to damage the eggs. Successful, he sits back and waits for his treat. "I actually think Ridley understands just how important what he's doing is; he gets so excited when he finds a nest, even before he gets his reward," says Shaver.

He's been doing this work for a season and a half now, and this summer, expectations are high that he'll be finding even more eggs. An extensive search-and-rescue operation began in April this year, and later this summer, as the baby turtles hatch, Ridley will be there watching, along with the television cameras and the crowds of squealing children who crowd the beach off Corpus Christi 10 to 20 mornings each year to see this miracle of regeneration. Ridley Shaver-in a role the 17th-century Scottish Highlanders who developed the breed could not have envisioned—not only lends a paw but most importantly, a nose to this environmental success story. ®

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Contributions to the sea turtle conservation effort may be sent to the National Park Service/Sea Turtle Recovery Project, Padre Island National Seashore, P.O. Box 181300, Corpus Christi, TX 78480-1300.

Andrew N. Guthrie, a former NBC News and Voice of America correspondent, has written several stories on sea turtles for VOA; he lives in Reston, Va., with his Katrina rescue dog, Lou.